

Policy Research Brief

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Alternative Schools and the Students They Serve: Perceptions of State Directors of Special Education

Recent data collected from a national survey estimates that about 12% of all students in alternative schools are students with disabilities. Yet we know very little about the nature of the instructional programs offered, special education processes and procedures in place, accountability practices, and outcomes for these students. In addition, we do not have complete descriptive information on the kinds of alternative schools and programs currently in operation. This Policy Research Brief reports findings from interviews conducted with 49 state directors of special education (or their designees). It describes their perceptions of (a) basic characteristics of alternative schools, (b) major issues for alternative schools, (c) major issues for state education agencies, (d) major issues for students with disabilities, and (e) educational reforms impacting alternative schools. The brief concludes with a discussion of trends that require further study.

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in many states, numbers of alternative schools and programs are on the rise, and grants supporting research related to alternative schools have been made. Findings from a recent national survey estimate that there were 10,900 public alternative schools and programs for at-risk students in the United States in 2000-2001 (Kleiner, Porph, & Farris, 2002). Results from this survey also indicate that about 12% of all students in alternative schools and programs for at-risk students were special education students with Individual Education Programs (IEP). Although this percentage is not significantly different from the overall percentage of special education students with IEPs enrolled in all public schools during the 2000-2001 school year, the percentage of special education students varied widely between districts, ranging from 3% to 20%. State-level research conducted in Minnesota found that students with emotional/behavioral disabilities were attending alternative programs in much higher proportions than traditional public schools (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993). It is clear that students with disabilities are attending alternative schools, yet questions remain about the extent to which and how students with disabilities are being served in these settings across our nation.

The growth of alternative schools in many states raises questions about their characteristics and use. A commonly accepted definition of alternative schools is not currently available and our review of state-level legislation/policy suggests that considerable variation exists in definitions across states. The *Common Core of Data*, the U.S. Department of Education's primary database on public elementary and secondary education, defines an alternative education school

■ Introduction

Interest in alternative schools and the students they serve has increased dramatically during recent years. New legislation focused on alternative schools has been enacted

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as “a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p.55). In their review of the literature, Lange & Sletten (2002) found that alternative schools are generally characterized as having small enrollment, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, supportive environments, opportunities and curriculum relevant to student interests, flexibility in structure, and an emphasis on student decision-making (Barr, 1981; Gold & Mann, 1984; Morley, 1991; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Young, 1990). Most educators, researchers, and policymakers do seem to agree that alternative schools are designed for students at risk of school failure (Raywid, 1994). As alternative schools continue to evolve and play a more prominent role in response to educational political, economic, and social forces of today, the need for current information about these settings and the students they serve grows.

What Do We Know About Alternative Schools and Students with Disabilities?

Although the amount of literature on students with disabilities and alternative schools is limited, some state-level data have been collected in Minnesota as part of federally-funded research conducted by the Enrollment Options Project at the University of Minnesota (1990-1998). In Minnesota, students can choose to attend an alternative program if they meet one or more criteria for at-risk status described in the High School Graduation Incentive Law established in 1987 (e.g., pregnant or parent, chemically dependent, behind in credits, or suspended or expelled). One study of Minnesota alternative programs found that 19% of enrolled students were identified as having a disability and over 50% of those students were identified as having an emotional/behavioral disorder (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993). These findings raised many questions related to enrollment, service delivery, implementation of the IEP, exit procedures, student satisfaction, and outcomes.

On average, when differences in “high risk” indicators such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status are statistically controlled, students with disabilities are among those at greatest risk of not completing school. Statistics show that the rate of dropout for students with disabilities is nearly twice that of general education students (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Of those students with disabilities who do not complete high school, about 36% are students with learning disabilities and 59% are students with emotional/behavioral disorders (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). The numbers of students with disabilities attending alternative schools by choice in Minnesota suggests that these settings may offer a desirable option for many who are trying to successfully complete school. The characteristics of some alternative schools that facilitate successful school completion for those at risk

of dropout – such as extra support/counseling for students, smaller and more personal settings, positive relationships with adults, meaningful educational and transition goals, and emphasis on living and vocational skills (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Lange, 1998; Marder, 1992) – may also be the elements necessary to keep students with disabilities in school. However, because data may not be routinely collected and/or because some students shed their label upon entrance into the alternative school, the number of students with disabilities attending as well as the number of students who graduate or obtain a General Education Development (GED) certificate through these programs is uncertain.

The enrollment of students with disabilities in alternative schools may also be affected as a result of protections offered through amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that were put into place in 1997 (Bear, Quinn & Burkholder, 2001). Students with disabilities who are expelled or suspended for more than 10 days must continue to receive services in an Interim Alternative Education Setting (IAES). These settings must allow students to continue to progress in the general curriculum, receive service and modifications as described in the IEP, and address the behavior that led to the IAES placement in order to prevent the behavior from recurring (IDEA, 1997; 34 CFR 300.522). Students with disabilities may be placed in an IAES for up to 45 days as a disciplinary measure. Subsequently, alternative schools and programs that serve these students are required to work with the originating school to provide special education services in accordance with the students’ IEPs. The extent to which alternative schools are being used as IAES across the nation is largely unknown.

While there are some state-specific studies (Lange & Lehr, 1999) examining alternative schools in relation to students with disabilities, there is very little national research documenting the extent to which and how students with disabilities are being served in these settings. The lack of information makes it difficult to draw any conclusions about the specific challenges that the presence of students with disabilities may present to the programs, impact on services provided, or the significance of this educational option for students with disabilities. The small amount of existing research on students with disabilities in alternative settings combined with recent educational reforms (e.g., IDEA 1997) necessitates data collection on a national scale.

The Alternative Schools Research Project

In October 2001, the University of Minnesota received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs to conduct research on alternative schools across the country and the students they serve. Special emphasis is given to studying the extent to which and how students with disabilities are being served within alternative schools. The three-year project consists of four studies:

- *Study I.* An examination of alternative schools nationwide to provide a broad understanding and typology of alternative schools and the extent to which they serve students with disabilities.
- *Study II.* An in-depth state-level examination of alternative schools, yielding at least five state-level case studies describing alternative school policies and practices for students with disabilities.
- *Study III.* A series of visits to alternative schools by field researchers to collect information directly from students with and without disabilities, parents, educators, and administrators.
- *Study IV.* A synthesis of the information gathered across the studies and recommendations to guide policy, practice, and further study.

The purpose of this brief is to share the results from an activity carried out as part of *Study I*. Telephone interviews were conducted with state directors of special education nationwide to obtain their perceptions of alternative schools in their state and issues for students with disabilities. We began with officials at the state department of education who could provide insight based on expertise and experience with state policy, responsibility for oversight, and knowledge of broader issues for students with disabilities in their state. The combined results of these interviews provide a general indication of what is occurring on a national level and help to identify issues and shape questions that should be addressed.

■ Method

Participants

State directors of special education from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia received a letter inviting them to participate in a 30- to 45-minute telephone interview asking about alternative schools in their state. A list of the interview questions was also provided. Ten days after the letter was mailed, they were contacted via e-mail or telephone to determine whether they had received the letter, had any questions, and would be willing to participate in an interview. Efforts to contact individuals and set appointments for the telephone interviews occurred over a period of several weeks and often took more than one attempt. Several directors identified designees to participate in the interviews on their behalf.

Interviews occurred during the spring of 2002 and averaged about 30 minutes each. In total, interviews were conducted with individuals from 48 states and the District of Columbia, yielding a 96% response rate. Respondents included 31 directors or assistant directors of special education, 13 designees within state departments of special education, and 5 consultants in departments of education with knowledge of alternative education.

Procedure

The interview was designed to gather information about how alternative schools operate across the nation. We were particularly interested in (a) the characteristics of the state's alternative schools and programs as perceived by state directors of special education, (b) students with special needs (e.g., those who receive special education) in relation to alternative schools/programs, and (c) the state education agency's role and involvement in alternative schools/programs. Questions were generated and refined by identifying gaps in the literature on alternative schools, by gathering input about key special education issues and alternative schools from an advisory group (primarily researchers and policymakers), and using issues specified in the grant proposal. The interview consisted of five general questions with corresponding probes:

- Describe alternative schools in your state.
- What are major issues for alternative schools in your state?
- What are major issues for state education agencies in relation to alternative schools?
- What are major issues for students with disabilities in relation to alternative schools?
- How have major educational reforms impacted alternative schools in your state?

Data Analysis

Detailed notes were taken as the interviews were being conducted. Immediately after an interview concluded, notes were reviewed and typed. Interviews were coded by question using *QSR NUD-IST* (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd., 1996), a computer program designed to assist with qualitative data analysis. The process of coding included (1) data reduction, which is the process of simplifying or coding data, (2) data display, which includes organizing information into an accessible compact form to facilitate analysis, and (3) conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For each question, responses were reviewed and coded by category, and similar responses were grouped into emergent themes. The unit of analysis was most often a sentence or multi-sentence chunk of data. A respondent could contribute to more than one theme within a category, but could have no more than one response for each theme. Comments within categories and themes were reviewed for continuity. For each question, the frequency and percentage of states that provided information for each theme was determined.

An inter-rater reliability check was conducted to determine consistency of coding. Two independent raters coded 31 different themes within categories such as kinds of students served, program orientation, enrollment, and student disability area. Inter-rater reliability reached 92% agreement across all variables. Although the rate of

agreement was high, suggesting good reliability, discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus.

■ Findings

Findings from the interviews are organized and presented according to each interview question. For each question, themes that emerged through data analysis are reported and summarized in a corresponding table. Most of the themes that are reported within various categories were mentioned by more than 20% of the respondents. When themes mentioned by more than 50% of respondents or less than 20% are reported, they are noted.

Although this research offers some insight about the status of alternative schools across the nation and the students they serve, it is important to remember that these are *perceptions* of state directors of special education and their designees. The majority of the data gathered in these interviews relied on self-report. The drawbacks of self-report data are well documented; responses may be influenced by social desirability, degree of familiarity with what is being asked, and level of understanding (Thorndike & Hagen, 1977). The extent to which state directors of special education were knowledgeable about alternative schools varied and in some cases was very limited. Although the use of open-ended questions during the interview could be viewed as a strength of the study, it also limited the consistency of responses between participants. Probes were used to guide the respondents and a protocol was used to standardize the interview process.

Describing Alternative Schools

Respondents were first asked to describe alternative schools in their state. Rather than defining *a priori* what was meant by alternative schools, descriptions of alternative schools were gathered from each respondent so as not to preclude or restrict the range of responses. After initial responses were obtained, follow-up probes were conducted. Overall, respondents identified five basic characteristics described below and in Table 1.

Enrollment by choice or placement. The majority of respondents indicated that students enrolled in alternative schools both as a result of choice and as a result of placement. Placement suggests that the alternative school is viewed as a “last resort,” and enrollment is usually not voluntary. Enrollment by choice implies that the alternative school is a desirable option under the control of the student or parent. Nearly 65% of the respondents indicated that students were placed in alternative schools as a result of a decision made by someone other than the student or parent (usually school staff). Students are often placed in alternative schools as an alternative to or following suspension or

expulsion. In other cases, students may be referred to alternative schools after attending juvenile detention centers. Although many states offer alternative schools as an educational option, discussion with respondents suggested that few states enroll students purely on the basis of choice. Most states appear to have various conditions that must be met in order for students to attend alternative schools. For example, although students may initiate interest, enrollment may require a team decision or counselor referral or require that certain criteria be met (e.g., student is pregnant or behind in credits). Some respondents suggested that students might be encouraged (pushed out) to attend alternative schools and enter more as a “forced choice.”

Setting. About one-third of the respondents indicated that alternative schools are housed in separate buildings off-campus. One-third of the respondents also indicated that alternative schools were housed within traditional public schools, sometimes in a separate wing of the school or in a designated classroom. In some states, alternative education that is delivered in a classroom or setting within the traditional school is distinguished as an alternative *program*.

Educational delivery. When asked to describe alternative schools, respondents most frequently emphasized a disciplinary orientation and a focus on improving behavior. Alternative schools were often described as settings for students who were having difficulty adjusting to the regular classroom environment or who experienced disciplinary problems in school. One type of scenario described mandatory attendance and exit contingent upon achieving and exhibiting appropriate behavior and academic progress while assigned to the alternative school. Respondents (< 20%) also indicated that alternative schools could be remedial in nature, transitional, career-oriented, or therapeutically-oriented.

Characteristics commonly associated with alternative schools across at least one-third of the states included small size (e.g., class size, overall enrollment, or student/teacher ratio) and flexibility. Respondents described flexibility in terms of varied schedules, varied hours of operation, and individualized programming.

Respondents described alternative schools as offering a creative curriculum— one that was innovative and incorporated hands-on or experiential learning relevant to student interests or needs. One-quarter of the respondents suggested that many alternative schools also used a core curriculum tied to state requirements or graduation standards. Respondents also noted that alternative schools offered a vocational, career planning or service learning component as part of their instructional program. Other types of curriculum mentioned by less than 20% of the respondents included GED programs, tutorial services, counseling, and teen parenting programs.

Governance. Over 60% of respondents indicated that alternative schools are governed at the local level and that

specific practices and procedures tend to be developed at the school or district level. Although many states have some legislation on alternative schools, the degree to which comprehensive state policies exist varies. Most state policies leave room for interpretation at the local level, which allows some autonomy to meet local needs. Respondents also indicated regional governance of alternative schools, usually through cooperative agreements between districts or counties. A handful of respondents (< 20%) mentioned the existence of alternative schools run by community-based organizations or private contracts.

Students. The students who attend alternative schools were most often described as students of high-school age. However, about 20% of the respondents perceived that growing numbers of students are being served at the middle-school level and some at the elementary age (these are typically add-on programs or targeted services). Students attending alternative schools were most often described as students at risk of dropout, students with behavior problems (ranging from students in need of social skills training to those with severe conduct disorders), and students exhibiting academic trouble (e.g., failing grades, behind academically). Other circumstances of students attending alternative schools mentioned by less than 20% of the respondents

included students who have been retained, students with a history of poor attendance, students who are pregnant or parenting, and students who are chemically dependent. Some respondents noted concern about possible over-representation of various minority groups attending alternative schools.

Major Issues for Alternative Schools

Although many state directors of special education may not be directly involved with alternative schools, their position requires a necessary knowledge of education programs and options that are available in their state. For this reason, we asked for their perceptions of major issues for alternative schools in their state, and their responses are summarized below and in Table 2.

Funding. When asked to identify and discuss major issues for alternative schools in their state, directors of special education most often cited issues related to funding. Many suggested that the money allotted for alternative schools was not sufficient to provide quality facilities or instructional resources. Some suggested that when budgets were slim and programs needed to be cut, alternative schools would be the first to go.

Staffing. Approximately one-third of the respondents indicated that staffing was a major issue for alternative schools

Table 1: Description of Alternative Schools

Enrollment by Choice or Placement

- Enrollment occurs on a continuum ranging from choice to placement.
- The majority of states indicated that students were placed in alternative schools/programs.*
- Few states allow students to enroll based on choice alone – usually other criteria must be met in order for enrollment to occur.*

Setting

- Alternative schools tend to be housed in separate buildings off the school campus or housed within traditional schools (e.g. in a separate wing, classroom, or “school within a school”).

Educational Delivery

- Alternative schools were primarily described as having a disciplinary orientation with a focus on managing/improving behavior.
- Characteristics included *small size* (e.g., class size, overall enrollment, student/teacher ratio), *flexibility* (hours, class schedule, individualized), and a *creative curriculum* (nontraditional, hands-on, experiential).
- The instructional program was typically described as including a *core curriculum* tied to district or state requirements and/or a *vocational/career planning/service learning* component.

Governance

- Governance occurs primarily at the local level.*

Students

- The majority of alternative schools are designed for high-school age students, although the demand for alternative schools serving middle school and elementary grade levels appears to be increasing.
- Students who attend alternative schools are generally described as being at risk of dropping out of school, having a history of behavioral or disciplinary problems in school (e.g., suspended or expelled), or failing school (e.g., behind in credits or poor academic skills or achievement).

Note: Responses are perceptions of 49 state directors of special education or their designees.

* Themes were mentioned by at least 20% of respondents; those statements with asterisks (*) were mentioned by more than half of the respondents.

in their state. Because alternative schools tend to be smaller with low student enrollment, relatively few teachers are employed at the sites. Thus, it is preferable and necessary for teachers to have dual certification. There is a need for teachers who are licensed in several subject areas as well as for teachers who are licensed in both regular and special education. In addition, staff need adequate training to work with students who often have significant academic or behavioral needs. Concerns in this area also focused on the general shortage of qualified special and regular education teachers.

Accountability. Another major issue for alternative schools mentioned by respondents was accountability. Although many of the respondents indicated an appreciation of alternative schools and agreed that they served an important function for students who were not successful in traditional schools, many noted the need for clearly documented measures of effectiveness and student success. Although anecdotal reports of alternative schools' impact on individual students exist, respondents emphasized the need for alternative schools to be held accountable for student progress and improved outcomes.

Other concerns raised, albeit less frequently (< 20%), included lack of adequate facilities, difficulties providing transportation, transition, and increasing numbers of students attending alternative schools to obtain their GED certificate. Some respondents also expressed concerns about whether the existence of alternative schools enable high schools by allowing them to avoid addressing systemic issues related to serving *all* students effectively.

Major Issues for State Education Agencies

Because officials within state education agencies are often given the responsibility of oversight, respondents were asked to provide their perspective on major issues for state

Table 2: Major Issues for Alternative Schools/Programs

Funding

- Lack of sufficient funds to provide for quality facilities and instructional resources. Alternative schools/programs may be the first to be affected by budget cuts.

Staffing

- Need for dual certification (in subject area and special education), training, and more licensed educators to teach in alternative schools.

Accountability

- Need for clearly documented measures of effectiveness and student success (outcomes).

Note: Responses are perceptions of 49 state directors of special education or their designees.

Themes were mentioned by at least 20% of respondents.

education agencies in relation to alternative schools. Their replies are summarized below and in Table 3.

Monitoring and compliance. The most frequent theme that emerged was monitoring and compliance. Respondents spoke about the need for increased monitoring to ensure the provision of a quality education in these settings. Areas specifically mentioned included measuring and tracking student enrollment and demographic information and progress and outcomes. In addition, the need to monitor compliance with special education due process requirements was noted. Comments from respondents suggested that monitoring and compliance issues in alternative schools might have been overlooked in the past. However, with increased alternative school enrollments in many states, increased scrutiny may occur.

Legislation and policies. More than 20% of the respondents noted concern about their state's limited existing or inconsistent policies regarding alternative schools. In some states, legislation may be minimal and state policy may not include a statewide definition, information on enrollment or exit, disciplinary approaches, or inclusion of students with special needs. This ambiguity makes an understanding of the purpose and operation of alternative schools difficult for those who are not directly involved.

Technical assistance and growth. Respondents indicated that providing technical assistance to staff in alternative schools was very difficult because of growing demand and shrinking resources. In many states, the number of alternative schools is increasing and often alternative schools have lists of students waiting to enroll. Increases in enrollment, along with the changes in IDEA 1997 and Title I, have resulted in a greater need for technical assistance, although the available resources are scarce.

Table 3: Major Issues for State Education Agencies

Monitoring and Compliance

- Need for increased monitoring to determine quality of instructional program, student enrollment, and demographic information, as well as progress and outcomes. Need for monitoring of special education due process and procedures.

Legislation and Policies

- Legislation may be minimal and state policy may not be comprehensive (lack of definition, limited description of policies and procedures).

Technical Assistance and Growth

- Increased demand for technical assistance and difficulty providing due to inadequate resources (time, staff, or money).

Note: Responses are perceptions of 49 state directors of special education or their designees.

Themes were mentioned by at least 20% of respondents.

Major Issues for Students with Disabilities

State directors of special education are in a unique position to provide an important state-level perspective on major issues for students with disabilities in relation to alternative schools. A summary of emergent themes is presented below and in Table 4.

Number of students served and disability category.

A primary issue that emerged in response to this question was the number of students served and the disability category to which they belonged. Many of the respondents indicated that they had very little or no data on the number of students with disabilities being served in alternative schools. They perceived that the primary disability category for students attending alternative schools was severe emotional disturbance (emotional/behavioral disability). Several (< 20%) respondents also noted anecdotal reports of an increase in the severity and variety of students with disabilities being served within alternative schools. While in the past, most students with disabilities attending alternative schools were identified as having learning disabilities, respondents believed that students with Tourette's syndrome, autism, mental health problems, and conduct disorders were now attending alternative schools.

Enrollment issues. Several topics emerged in relation to enrollment of students with disabilities in alternative schools. One concern focused on the perception that students with disabilities may be pushed out of traditional schools and into alternative schools in either a subtle or an overt manner. One scenario suggested that rather than placing students in a more restrictive setting or a more costly environment, alternative schools are offered as another option. Secondary-level administrators or staff may

urge students to try the alternative school first.

According to interview results, once a student with a disability enrolls in an alternative school, several scenarios may occur. In some alternative schools, procedures may be in place ensuring a review of the IEP and implementation of services at a level similar to what the student received in the past. In other schools, the IEP may be rewritten to reflect a lower level of service, oftentimes indirectly. If the IEP is rewritten, it may not be closely followed. In other cases, the student may shed the special education label, either by student or parent choice or through termination of the IEP.

Respondents suggested that many factors influence the degree to which the IEP is implemented. Some indicated that educators felt that student needs could be met through the existing alternative program (rather than through special education) given the smaller student-teacher ratio and more individualized programming. Barriers to appropriate implementation of special education include the availability of certified special education teachers and paraprofessionals and school size (which can limit flexibility and resources). In less than 20% of the cases, respondents mentioned the existence of an adversarial relationship between alternative school educators and special educators. Some alternative educators believe that students who receive special education should not be served in alternative schools because they already have funding and a set of supports in place, whereas students without disabilities who are at risk of school failure depend on the enrollment slots available through the alternative school.

Service delivery. The third major issue that surfaced in relation to students with disabilities and alternative schools focused on the delivery of services. Nearly half of the respondents raised questions and concerns about the

Table 4: Major Issues for Students with Disabilities

Number of Students Served and Disability Category

- Limited or no data available on the number of students with disabilities being served in alternative schools.
- Perception that primary handicapping condition of students with disabilities attending alternative schools is emotional/behavioral disability.

Enrollment Issues

- Alternative schools generally viewed as another educational option available to students with disabilities.*
- Students may be pushed out of traditional school in a subtle or overt manner.
- Individual Education Program may be continued, modified, or terminated upon entrance into the alternative school.

Service Delivery

- Questions regarding provision or quality of services in place for students with disabilities.
- Questions about quality and availability of staff licensed in special education.
- Questions about degree to which alternative schools are appropriate settings for students with disabilities (resources available to meet student needs, least restrictive environment).

Note: Responses are perceptions of 49 state directors of special education or their designees.

* Themes were mentioned by at least 20% of respondents; those statements with asterisks (*) were mentioned by more than half of the respondents.

provision and quality of service provided within the alternative school for students with disabilities. Concerns were also raised about the qualifications and availability of staff licensed in special education, and about whether students with disabilities had access to the breadth of content curriculum and subject areas available in larger traditional public schools. About one-quarter of the respondents perceived that alternative schools could be “good” settings for students with disabilities. Many identified characteristics of alternative schools that could facilitate a successful school experience, such as a smaller setting, more individual attention, individualized work pace, focus on career planning or vocational education, provision of work-study experiences, provision of counseling, flexible schedule, etc. However, respondents also voiced concern about whether alternative schools met the requirement to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting, as some alternative schools tend to be somewhat isolated and serve an at-risk population.

Reforms Impacting Alternative Schools

Public education across our country (including alternative schools) is being shaped by a variety of federal, state, and local influences. Respondents were asked to describe the impact of major educational reforms on alternative schools in their state. Their replies are summarized below and in Table 5.

Increase school completion. More than one-third of the respondents indicated that pressure from state and federal authorities to decrease dropout rates raised awareness of the dropout problem. And in many cases, alternative programs are seen as one way of keeping kids in school.

Table 5: Reforms Impacting Alternative Schools

Efforts to Decrease Dropout and Increase School Completion

- Pressure to keep kids in school and increase the rate of school completion for all students.

Standards-based Reform and Accountability

- Perceived impact includes increased numbers of students enrolling in alternative schools, increase in students choosing to obtain GED certificates, efforts to align curriculum with state standards, and efforts to raise test scores.

IDEA Disciplinary Requirements

- Helping to keep students with disabilities who are expelled or suspended in school, increased awareness of positive behavioral supports, and use of alternative programs as Interim Alternative Education Settings (IAES).

Note: Responses are perceptions of 49 state directors of special education or their designees.

Themes were mentioned by at least 20% of respondents.

Standards-based reform and accountability. Over a third of the respondents talked about the impact of standards-based reform and increases in statewide accountability measures on alternative programs. Perceived impacts of this educational reform movement included increased numbers of students enrolling in alternative schools and an increase in the number of students choosing to obtain a GED certificate. Perceived challenges as a result of the standards-based reform effort include trying to raise test scores for students who have not done well in traditional schools, measuring the effectiveness of alternative programs in ways other than achievement test scores, and incorporating standards and curriculum linked to standards.

IDEA disciplinary requirements. About one-quarter of the respondents noted that the disciplinary requirements of IDEA 1997 affected alternative schools. Some perceived that IDEA helped to keep students with disabilities from dropping out of school and some believed that these protections should also be available to students without disabilities who are expelled or suspended. Many of the students who are staying in school are attending alternative schools via choice or placement and there is a perceived increased demand on staff to work with students who have challenging behaviors. IDEA has also drawn attention to the use of positive behavioral supports in traditional and alternative schools and promoted staff development related to effective strategies for behavior management. Interestingly, about 20% of the respondents indicated that alternative schools were not widely used as interim alternative education settings, and a similar percentage indicated that they did not have clear data documenting their use in this capacity.

Other reforms identified as impacting alternative schools included increased interest in providing school choice, increased emphasis on early intervention, zero tolerance policies, safe school initiatives, and no social promotion policies.

■ Discussion and Summary Impressions

The number of alternative schools in many states is growing, yet we know little about these settings and the students they serve. Serving students who are at risk of educational failure appears to be one feature that is relatively consistent across states. Aside from this similarity, alternative schools seem to vary in terms of approach, enrollment procedures, exit criteria, definition, and instructional programs offered (Lange & Sletten, 2002). The variation between and within states adds to the challenges presented when conducting national research on alternative schools. The responses from interviews with state directors of special education help to provide a broad indication of what is occurring across our nation, especially in relation to students with disabilities and alternative schools. Results from these interviews provide some ideas

about issues to pursue in the study of these settings. Trends that require further research are briefly discussed below:

- **Significant growth in many states.** Many state directors of special education/designees perceived that the number of alternative schools and programs was increasing at a dramatic rate. Statistics confirm this perception: the number of students attending alternative schools and the number of alternative schools has increased in many states. For example, the number of students attending alternative programs in Minnesota increased from about 13,800 students in 1990/91 to about 152,000 in 2000/01 (Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, 2001). Minnesota is only one example of the increased numbers of students who are receiving their education through these programs. This rapid growth raises many basic questions. For example, what accounts for the significant increase in programs and enrollment? Who attends these programs and what are the reasons for transfer? What is the quality of the instructional program being offered? What are the student outcomes after attending alternative programs?
- **Student placement in alternative schools.** Although respondents indicated that students may attend alternative schools as a result of choice, nearly two-thirds noted that students are placed in alternative schools. Alternative schools began as options for students who wanted to attend a different type of school (Young, 1990). Historically, these schools provided an educational option that was viewed as desirable for students who chose to transfer. Often, they served students who did not fit the traditional educational setting. More recently, it appears that students are being placed in alternative programs as an alternative to (or following) suspension or expulsion. Designation as a last resort has significant implications for educational programming, desired outcomes, and indicators of effectiveness. Some fear that alternative schools will be used as dumping grounds for more “undesirable” students.
- **Serving younger students and students with more severe needs.** Some respondents perceived that alternative schools are increasingly serving students with more severe needs. If this is the case, there are implications for staff development and training. Teachers must have the requisite skills to effectively serve students with severe emotional, behavioral, or academic needs. Interview respondents also noted increased demand for serving students in the elementary grades. In one state, an alternative school is being designed to serve elementary-age students who require intensive remediation as an alternative to retention. If states take this approach, numerous issues and practices must be carefully considered and addressed (e.g., segregation, transition practices, accountability).

- **Increased focus on disciplinary orientation.** Alternative schools seem to be shifting in orientation from the types described in earlier research (Raywid, 1994) to alternatives with a disciplinary emphasis only. Although these schools have been in existence before, it appears that they are increasingly becoming the norm. This shift is consistent with statements from former Secretary of Education Richard Riley in 1999 noting a need for more alternative schools and programs for children and youth who have been (or who are at risk of being) suspended and expelled (National Association of Directors of Special Education, 1999). In Pennsylvania, former governor Schweiker announced that more than \$26,000,000 had been appropriated for alternative-education grants to make Pennsylvania schools safer and to improve student learning:

These schools can help schools get disruptive students out of regular classrooms and into settings where they can get counseling and extra help. The Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth Program is a key component of the Administration's landmark safe-schools initiative. Schools can use the funds to remove chronically disruptive students from regular school programs and place them in alternative education programs (McCloud, 2002).

If states choose to use alternative schools exclusively for chronically disruptive youth, critical questions must be addressed. What are the implications for students who are placed in these settings? What are the entrance and exit procedures? How will transition into and out of regular schools be handled? Will support services be available in the regular setting to assist with transition? What is the responsibility of traditional schools for serving these students? How will the quality of programming be monitored? What are the implications for students with disabilities? What are the implications for students who choose alternative schools as another educational option?

- **Enrollment and service delivery for students with disabilities.** Based on comments from several state directors, the interview raised awareness of the need for easily accessible and accurate data on the extent to which students with disabilities are being served in alternative schools. The extent to which states have the capacity to disaggregate enrollment and accountability data for alternative schools by disability status is unclear and thus there are more questions than answers about how students with disabilities fare in alternative schools and programs. State directors of special education voiced many concerns about the special education processes and procedures in place for students with disabilities. Although essential elements and strategies of effective alternative programs have been recommended (Quinn, Rutherford & Osher, 1999; Tobin & Sprague, 2000), the

extent to which these practices are implemented is uncertain and research documenting outcomes for students for students with disabilities is necessary.

- **Concerns with funding.** Although funding has increased in many states that offer alternative education options, it appears that these increases are due to grants or special initiatives rather than continuing financial support by state legislatures. This type of funding is difficult to sustain. Many state directors of special education indicated that alternative schools would be the first educational services to be cut in many districts with tight budgets. In addition, many perceived that alternative schools have inadequate facilities (e.g., buildings that are in disrepair) or lack of resources (e.g., textbooks, computers). The extent to which inequities in funding exist between alternative schools and other schools requires further study.
- **Increased recognition of the need for accountability.** Many state directors of special education indicated that they believed alternative schools were desirable and effective in their state, yet data documenting their effectiveness were not readily available or had not been collected. The push for increased accountability as evidenced by clearly documented outcomes has gained momentum in recent years. Furthermore, as the number of public alternative schools and programs continues to grow, increased calls for accountability are likely. Given the variety of alternative schools in existence, it is especially important to evaluate their relative effectiveness and to develop systematic procedures for collecting data in an efficient and comprehensive manner.

State directors of education provide a unique perspective on alternative schools and major issues for students with disabilities at a state-wide level. Many of the responses portrayed complex issues and reflected a richness beyond the summary themes (see Table 6). Many themes that emerged are consistent with the literature on alternative schools (e.g., various characteristics). However, many of the themes that emerged point to concerns, issues, and questions that require further study. For students with disabilities who are at increased risk of not completing school, identifying these issues and their impact is critical. State-level officials as well as other educators and policymakers are encouraged to examine alternative school policies and practices in light of the issues identified in this research brief. Issues of concern must be carefully considered and addressed in order to provide the best possible education for students with and without disabilities who are attending these schools and programs.

Although findings from these interviews provide a broad national picture, we must ask about the extent to which these perceptions are similar to those of others, including state-level alternative school specialists, alternative school educators, general and special education teachers, parents, and students. Based in part on these

Table 6: Interview Results: Select Statements

- I am not sure about the quality of the alternative programs and I really don't know what is out there. We have tremendous growth in alternatives because schools are beginning to rely on these programs for kids who don't fit in the traditional programs. There is a significant increase in the number of kids entering alternative programs.
- The host district is quick to send kids to the alternative school and slow to send resources (e.g. staff). It is unfortunate that sometimes when kids in the traditional setting need expensive service, the staff at traditional schools may recommend trying the alternative school first, before the other placement (because it is less expensive). Often the student will try the alternative school, the alternative school will make it work, and the student ends up staying.
- One issue is equity and reduced hours of service. The IEP says one thing and the levels of service couldn't be replicated in the alternative school. The main issue is equity in the delivery of services between the two settings.
- There is lip service to thinking of individual needs, providing accommodations and adaptations, and recognizing the value of having a continuum of services, but I am skeptical that some alternative schools are dumping grounds.
- A major issue is the isolation of these schools. Even in "schools within schools," these kids are isolated from others. Ironically, this is similar to special education in the past where kids were segregated from others.
- Use of alternative schools avoids addressing the systemic issue. Once we create an alternative school, the high school is off the hook. They don't have to change in order to serve these kids.
- One of the messages from some parents and students is that they appreciate having the alternative school option, and that if it wasn't for the option, the student would not have stayed in school. There is a real sense of community in these alternative settings.
- Alternative schools have recently had great success in our state in reducing the dropout rate and are playing a key role, especially for older students who want to come back to school and graduate.

Note: Statements have been paraphrased and are not direct quotes.

findings, a survey was developed and sent to individuals at each state department of education with knowledge of alternative schools. The survey asks more in-depth data-based questions about alternative school policies and procedures and the extent to which students with disabilities are being served in these settings (e.g., percent of students enrolled, disability category, use as IAESs, special education services). In addition, field visits to alternative schools and interviews with educators, parents, and students with and without disabilities will occur during the third year of

the study. This research will help to provide a much-needed data-based description of alternative schools and the students they serve. Furthermore, understanding the role alternative schools play in the education of students at risk of school failure will enhance services and help to facilitate successful school outcomes for students with disabilities.

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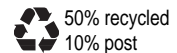
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